



# Denver's Federal District: Placemaking in Progress

At first glance, the changes that have been taking place around downtown Denver's four-block Federal District are easy to overlook.

One plaza sports new benches and a podium where an "ambassador" greets visitors, dispensing directions and other assistance. Flowers have been planted at street corners, near building entrances and atop concrete security barriers. On some days special events, such as a festival celebrating cultural diversity or a giant cookout, take place. A mural decorates a wall that surrounds a day-care play yard.

These changes are harbingers of better things to come, GSA Rocky Mountain Region property management staff hope. Their message is that the public spaces of the Federal District, which became what one observer called "a fortress" during the trial of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, are coming back to life. Though security is a continuing concern, their goal is to make the area more active, interesting and welcoming—



The newly renovated plaza at the Byron G. Rogers Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Denver's Federal Center

Photos: GSA Rocky Mountain Region

**A Field Report from the  
GSA Center for Urban Development**

The plaza at the Rogers complex before renovations began  
Photo: Todd W. Bressi



a friendlier place for federal workers and people visiting federal facilities, and a catalyst for further public and private investment.

"There are wonderful spaces here, but hardly anyone uses them," says Eric Anderson, a principal at Civitas, a Denver-based design firm consulting on a master plan for the area.

And bigger changes are coming. In July, 2002, a \$1.6 million reconstruction of the plaza at the Byron Rogers complex was completed, and construction is nearing completion on a \$75 million courthouse annex that will cover an adjacent city block—projects that will signal the revitalization of the Federal District even more dramatically. Moreover, city planners expect downtown will expand north beyond the edges of the Federal District in coming years, and the area could see a burst of dense residential construction.

So far, GSA has won high marks for rethinking how it manages the Federal District. "It's extraordinary to see a local face on a federal agency, to see this process engage the local community so intimately and think about these issues at such a fine grain," Denver City Councilmember Susan Barnes-Gelt said.

#### **To Plan or Not to Plan**

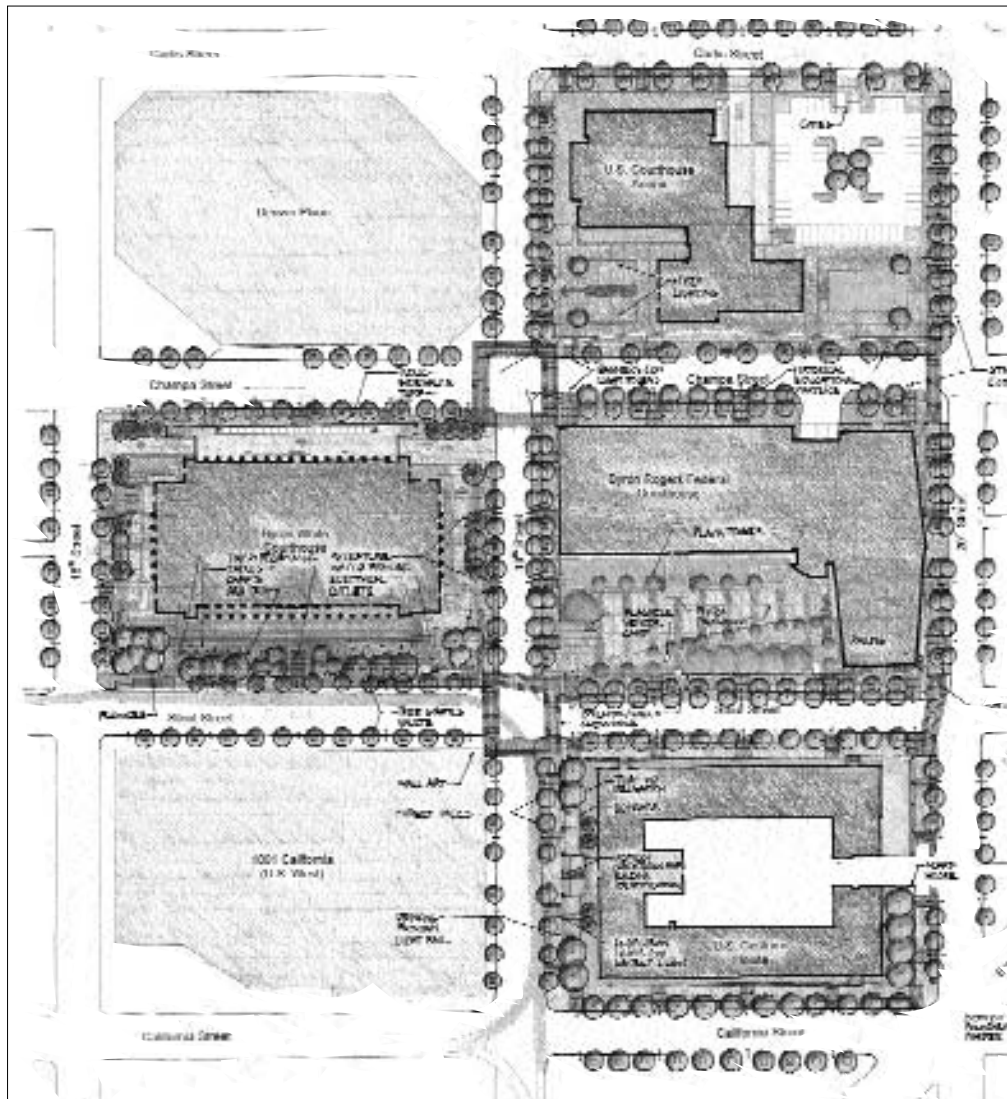
Denver's Federal District occupies four square blocks near the heart of downtown. One block is occupied by the Byron White Federal Courthouse, a neoclassical building erected as the city's main post office in 1916,

and another block is occupied by the U.S. Custom House, originally built in 1930 as a high school; both buildings are on the National Register of Historic Places.

A third block contains the Byron Rogers Courthouse and Federal Building (1964), a modern tower and podium complex whose 1,200 employees constitute the bulk of the federal work force in the area. The last block is the site of the new courthouse annex, targeted for completion in 2002.

The changes at the Federal District are an outgrowth of the GSA's commitment to make its buildings not only better places for workers and visitors, but also better neighbors in the communities where they are located.

At first, attention was focused on the plaza at the Rogers office building and courthouse. In the best of times, it was little more than "an expanse of sprawling concrete with not much going on," said Al Camp, director of GSA's First Impressions program. Then, during the McVeigh trial, security officials feared reprisals and bunkered down, adding perimeter security barriers, banning parking from adjacent streets and tightening screening at building entrances. Also, the office tower entrance was nearly dysfunctional: "it was obscured and tucked in a corner" of the plaza, and too small to accommodate a modern security checkpoint, resulting in long queues, Camp said. Some tenants were so unhappy they were asking to leave.



Denver Federal District  
Master Plan  
Graphic: Civitas

Regional staff then called in GSA's Center for Urban Development and its consultant, Project for Public Spaces. Their advice: look at not only the plaza but also larger opportunities within the district that could ultimately support the intentions of the plaza and entry project.

GSA's next step was to commission a master plan with help from Civitas and Gensler, an international architecture and urban design firm with a Denver office. Three workshops, in September 1999, January 2000 and August 2000, helped identify opportunities and constraints, lay out goals for what kind of place the district should be, and organize an action plan. Representatives from federal tenants, city agencies, cultural groups and civic groups, as well as surrounding property owners, have taken part.

Early on, though, the dynamic shifted: "The building managers didn't want a master plan,

they wanted something they could do around their building in three weeks," observed Fred Kent, president of Project for Public Spaces, which is also consulting on the project.

"Instead of the master plan leading the process, the building operators are using the designers as a resource. They are doing things and seeing how it will fit into a plan."

Thus, last summer, even as the master plan and the plaza redesign were proceeding, GSA staff took some first steps—small, incremental, even experimental. They included the benches, flowers, mural, ambassador program and special events, and a Federal District visitors guide and map.

As a result of those modest changes, "I've observed incredible, increased use on all the plazas, positive feedback from employees and the public," says Janet Preisser, who works on



**Left column:** Improvements to building entrances, tree plantings and better landscape maintenance have improved the street atmosphere in the Federal District.

**Right column:** Improvements to the Rogers complex plaza will have a longer-term impact.

**Photos:** GSA Rocky Mountain Region, Todd W. Bressi

special projects for GSA's Rocky Mountain Region. "This is just the tip of the iceberg," adds Kent. "This will have a whole chain of reactions that none of us would have expected."

Indeed, the master plan suggests a wide range of improvements. They are presented as a "kit of parts," a menu of ideas towards which GSA, public agencies and property owners can work. "We're not taking the attitude, 'If you build a public space they will come.' Our attitude is, 'If your goal is to activate a space, what do you have to do?'" says Blake Mourer, a planner with Gensler.

"The kit of parts means you always have something to try," he added. "You may hit a barrier in one direction, but the kit of parts gives you other options. This is very different from a master plan that comes up with a proposal that costs millions."

The master plan also identifies ways the annex and plaza projects can help advance the district's broader goals. For example, the annex project involves the construction of a tunnel under Champa Street to the Rogers courthouse, which means the street and side-

walks will have to be reconstructed. The master plan, meanwhile, calls for narrowing the street and improving the streetscape. The hope is to coordinate the two: "It's really an opportunity-driven plan. If the city decides to repave Champa, we can talk to them about moving the curbs, because we've already thought about it," said Civitas' Anderson. Indeed, GSA has developed cost estimates for improving the block and will soon begin discussing with civic groups and the city how the work might be paid for.

### Bringing in Partners

The public space improvements so far have been financed through GSA operating funds. "This shows there is a lot a building manager can do on their own," says Tim Horne, manager of the properties in the Federal District. The Rogers plaza reconstruction is being funded as a GSA First Impressions project, and the annex is being funded through a direct Congressional appropriation, as are most federal projects of this sort.

But GSA has clear constraints. Its budget only goes so far, its capacity to organize



events is limited and its ability to get involved in off-site improvements is restricted. Thus Rocky Mountain Region staff realize it is critical to bring in partners who offer different resources and expertise. A number of arrangements are in the works:

- Beacons, a non-profit youth development group, is painting the day-care center mural.
- The Denver Regional Transportation District planted new trees along the segment of its rail line that passes through the district, and is considering changing the name of the station at the Byron White Courthouse to clearly indicate its location at the Federal District.
- The Denver-based Harmsen Foundation is loaning some of its art holdings for an exhibition in the Byron White Courthouse. The Denver Art Museum may also lend sculpture to be displayed in various plazas, or smaller artworks to be displayed in public areas in the courthouses and office buildings.

- The University of Colorado at Denver architecture school is organizing two studios that will consider the future of the Federal District and the transitional area adjacent to it. Although the studios won't prepare a formal plan, they'll consider how the Federal District could catalyze, or connect to, the new development the city envisions.

The planning group is also enlisting nearby property owners in support of the plan's goals. The owner of the Denver Center, an inward-oriented office and shopping complex behind the Byron White Courthouse, brainstormed at one workshop about entry and facade improvements that might help his retail tenants. Qwest (the regional telephone company), which owns an eleven-story garage that faces the Customs House, has responded positively to a workshop suggestion about sprucing up the parking deck's dreary facade, perhaps with special banners or scrims that promote civic and cultural occasions.



An ambassador stationed on the Byron Rogers plaza helps make the Federal District a more welcoming place.  
Photo: GSA Rocky Mountain Region

### Challenges Ahead

After a year of planning and a summer of making incremental changes to its public spaces, GSA and its consultants are considering what the next steps should be. While the master plan identifies specific medium- and long-term goals that GSA should aim for, there are also four aspects of the process that GSA must keep alive:

*Keeping the investment coming.* Many of the improvements the plan recommends, such as signage, site furnishings and landscaping, will likely require GSA funding. Yet GSA's ability to fund even the modest improvements made so far is fragile, Horne said. "I look like a hero, but if we had the budget now that we had a few years ago, we wouldn't even have had money for flowers."

GSA's strategy will be to direct federal resources towards improvements that not only benefit people who use the Federal District but also demonstrate how careful investments can have an impact beyond government property lines and attract additional local resources. One hopeful sign: the region is

A brochure explains how to get around the Federal District, and the history of the architecture. Graphic: GSA Rocky Mountain Region



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planning to contract for continued services from its Federal District Ambassador, who will also be responsible for organizing events on the Rogers complex plaza.

*Coordinating and compromising.* The master plan establishes an agenda for future improvements, but the approach to implementing them will probably be largely opportunistic—such as coupling Champa Street pedestrian improvements with the construction of a passageway underneath it. Identifying those links and embedding them in relevant capital plans and contracts will require a creative eye, ongoing consultation and coordination among the various entities, and willingness on everyone's parts to modify projects so that they address a greater good.

*Expanding the partnerships.* As the master plan evolves, more players will need to take part. Denver city planners and public works staff have to engage even more substantively than they have so far. Another next step will be to involve officials from Denver's downtown post office, across the street from the annex, in the planning effort.

*Thinking long-term.* Downtown Denver hasn't seen much new development since the 1980s, but city planners think the area north of the Federal District is ripe for development, particularly housing. The Federal District occupies a key location: "It's very important that they make long-term decisions that don't create long-term barriers," Barnes-Gelt said. "This place should be a transition, not a barrier. Over time, it will be a very strong center of activity."

Just as the improvements made so far to the Federal District may be easy to overlook, so is the importance of the master-planning process that is under way. The simple act of fixing up a plaza, as part of GSA's normal course of doing business, has inspired the reconsideration of the public spaces in an entire urban district. In a long run, GSA is building a foundation of ideas and relationships that will enable the agency and its neighbors to engage in greater and greater circles of city building, whatever the challenges may be.